



## NATO DEFENSE COLLEGE FOUNDATION

### STRATEGIC TRENDS

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#### CHINA

##### **A border incident encumbers the visit of China's President to India**

A recent visit (17-19 September) of China's President Xi Jinping to India helped improving, but fell short of straightening out the historically prickly relations between the two countries. The visit succeeded in opening new channels of economic cooperation with China committing \$30 billion dollars for major infrastructure projects undertaken by the Indian government, yet it failed to redress the areas of contention between the two Asian giant nations.

Possibly the new Indian prime minister Narendra Modi was expecting that Xi Jinping, in view of his reforming spirit, would be prepared to settle the longstanding border dispute along the agreement on the Chinese northern boundary signed in 2004 by his predecessor Hu Jintao with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

If that was the case, Modi's expectations were dashed the day after the arrival of President Xi when a contingent of 1,000 Chinese soldiers intruded into Indian-held territory in Southern Ladakh, one of the two contested regions along the Sino-Indian border. The news came just an hour before a banquet Modi had arranged to honour his guest. While 1,500 Indian soldiers were promptly sent off to counter the intrusion, Modi asked Xi to withdraw his soldiers and even if Xi agreed to the request, the incident all but spoiled the scope of his visit to India.

The Indian media lashed out at the incident and political analysts were at a loss to make sense out of it. How could China launch an incursion into Indian-held territory while the Chinese President was in India and about to discuss ways to improve bilateral relations?

The most likely explanation is that it was a deliberate act to weaken Xi Jinping's hold on power by opponents of his reform agenda and particularly of his relentless anti-corruption campaign that has already ousted and castigated thousands of public officials.

Whoever was behind the border incident, Xi Jinping moved quickly to prevent any further attempt to undermine his authority. First he indirectly hinted at the impending elevations of two generals faithful to him, one of whom will head the military's discipline commission that has the power of weed out corruption within the Chinese Army and of punishing dereliction of duty – such as the one likely to have occurred during Xi's Indian visit.

Second, he gathered in Beijing all the top army commanders to address inconsistencies in the chain of military command and develop more efficiency as well as reliability and faithfulness to the core leader. In the last few months, President Xi has spent a great deal of time abroad to strengthen China's position at international level. It is now to be expected that he will concentrate his efforts in strengthening his ascendancy in his own country.